

Systems of Offences and Leaders of Change

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Text: Matthew 18:1-14

This excerpt from Christ's earthly conversations has an intense outflow of emotions and light. The question that is posed is significant. But, far more significant is Christ's elaboration of the problem at hand. He begins by answering the question of true greatness and then tracks down into an agonizing analysis of the world-problem that nips that same greatness in the bud. For, the child is certainly the sacred model of greatness, but the child is sooner going to reach the age when he has to look back to his childhood for a recovery of that child-like innocence again. At this 4/14 Window Pre-Summit, I believe it is apt to reconsider the roots of our world that shape the consciences of the next generation.

True Greatness

When the disciples asked Jesus "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" Jesus did not point at Alexander the Great, or to Augustus Caesar, or to Plato or Aristotle. He brought in a child into the midst of them and said "I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven."

Of course, the question was not "Who is the greatest on the earth?" but "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" For, earthly greatness could never be an issue for man. It is blatant, though ephemeral. But, the true disciple searches for what it really means to be great in the kingdom of God, for a greatness that spans true eternity. And, the divine answer could only be found in the lips of the divine Master.

By Christ's verdict, the child is the model of true greatness. The child epitomizes the kingdom virtues of simplicity (unsoiled by culture), credulity (unblocked by sophism), dependency (untainted by ambition), innocence (uncorrupted by sin), tenderness (unhardened by offences), and pliability (untempered by willful convictions).

The very reason the question of greatness is asked demonstrates the rootedness of the world-problem. The question of greatness would never have been posed unless the child-likeness was already destroyed in the first place. The problem of inequality, indifference, rejection, and all injustice lies at the root of this world-problem that Christ now brings to light.

The conversation here significantly focuses on the value and experience of a child. Of course, some have interpreted the rest of the passage as talking of the least of the disciples; but, the context here does centrally focus on the world-experience of God's child. The parable of the lost sheep doesn't

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speak of a disciple being lost, but shows the importance of the one little sheep among the ninety-nine. The Father is not willing that any of these little ones be lost. And, isn't it true that lostness and rootlessness is an experience that falls on the kids of our generation in the 4/14 Window?

Worlds in Conflict

Two worlds are in conflict in this passage: God's world versus man's world.

In God's world, the child is regarded with honor, respect, dignity, greatness, and significance. Despite, the theological contentions within the spectrum of the Calvinist-Arminian debate, the child's position is secure in the world of God. The universality of sin cannot be denied; however, the universality of the child's tender nature also cannot be ruled out. The world in all its manifold deception still can't generally tolerate offence against little children. How much more would God stand for them?

In man's world, the child is unwelcomed, unwanted, unaccepted, unrecognized, oppressed, tempted, and snared into evil. In fact, often times, the human modes of welcoming a child into the world are so much tainted by sinful culture that the true place of the child is lost into a corner (completely different from the place God gives them). Christ breaks out "Woe to the world because of the things that cause people to sin!" (v.7) But why is the world such an offensive system? In fact, the world as it is cannot be regarded in the singular anymore. It is a system of systems and a world of worlds. We do not live in a universe, but in an ideological pluriverse. The worlds are systems of thoughts, relations, and functioning that are both in conflict with each other and with God's world. We may divide the world-influencers into three groups:

1. *World-Views*: These are ways in which we perceive the world. They are the ideologies and philosophical theologies that stay rooted at the base of any world-system. Casteism, Communism, Humanism, Talibanism, Hindutva, Fascism are all examples of world-views that influence human values. When Christ brings in the child and sets him in the midst, He demonstrates the conflict of God's world-view with the world-view of the general world at hand.
2. *World-Systems*: These are ways in which our particular world functions in this pluriverse. It is the cultural setup of any world-machinery into which a child is forced to fix in. The Nazi government, Taliban government, Communist government, Caste-system, etc are examples of world-systems that influence human conduct. Usually, cogs within a machine are bound to submit to the laws of that machine; however, it is also possible that in a multi-interactive cultural setup, exposed to a plurality of world-views and systems, individual world-systems could spring into being. These may look as a minority and strange, but one must understand that every human is a dynamic entity that imbibes and constructs her own cultural mind-world of meanings and values. It is not slantingly that the Scripture announces, "GOD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually" (Gen.6:5). This is not to incriminate every world-system as totally evil, but to show that any world-system that doesn't subscribe to God's kingdom principles is routed for self-destruction. It is in this sense that we may understand the exclamatory "Woe to the world because of the things that cause people to sin!" (v.7)

3. *World-Leaders*: These are the agents that lead the world-system on the principles of particular world-views. They are humans. Christ declares, “if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea” and “woe to the man through whom they [i.e. offences] come!” (vv.6,7).

A world-system is a world-game with its own rules, codes, language, and *modus operandi*. It is aimed to be completely self-sufficient, self-contained, closed, and rational. In a world-system that is thoroughly evil, evil is not felt, because of the smooth *modus operandi*. Evil itself is a rational principle of operation in that machine. It is like a closed space shuttle speeding at a uniform velocity. The astronauts inside wouldn't be able to say whether the shuttle is moving or is at rest, since it is detached from all coordinates of reference outside. That is why, for instance, stoning to death, a practice in some cultures, would appear an evil to outsiders, but to those within that particular culture, it would appear quite necessary. Similarly, until the Renaissance movement struck the cords of the Indian conscience, *sati* and child marriage were not considered evil. Some interference and clash of worlds was necessary in order to begin the reformation. An evil world-system permits oppression, promotes oppression, practices oppression, and profits from that oppression; but, is incapable of perceiving it as oppression. It is thoroughly infested with evil; therefore, it is subject to the predication of a “Woe!”

Any rescue can only be holistic when it rescues one from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of light. We can't just keep trying to save people from being crushed under the giant wheel of destruction; we need to jam the wheel itself (cf. Dietrich Bonhoeffer), and certainly the biblical way. We must work at the grass root level; but, we shouldn't forget the ideological roots behind all surface evils as well. Isn't there a reason why in some cultures, beggary is non-existent, while in others beggary is prevalent and religiously endorsed? Why is it so that in particular contexts, red spits of chewed *pans* stain walls of government offices, while in other contexts offices are as clean as could be? Why are there so many uncared street children lying on the platforms and footpaths in some cultures, while in others such people groups are never around? Care, compassion, cleanliness, and conscience are all strongly influenced by the world-system we try to conform to. The world-system is based on a general world-view and is led ahead by world-leaders. The Bible is very specific: one leader can lead a whole nation into hell. Historically, that has happened. One shouldn't marvel why the Northern Kingdom of Israel so greatly differed from the Southern Kingdom of Judah before the end of their monarchies.

Historical Examples

The Cult of Moloch – Child-sacrifices are rarely heard of today. However, they were widely prevalent in ages past. The cult of Moloch of Canaan was one such cult in which children were offered up as sacrifice for the betterment of the land and community. The ritual was cruel; however, the people considered it necessary and indispensable to their system. The religious world-view that they had influenced their world-system (cult, culture) and was strongly led on by leaders (priests, elders, rulers).

King Manasseh of Judah – 2 Kings 21 records one of the most oppressive periods in the history of Judah. King Manasseh's sins are recorded in the words: “He sacrificed his own son in the fire, practiced sorcery and divination, and consulted mediums and spiritists. He did much evil in the eyes of the LORD, provoking him to anger” (v.6), “Manasseh also shed so much innocent blood that he

filled Jerusalem from end to end-besides the sin that he had caused Judah to commit, so that they did evil in the eyes of the LORD” (v.16). Manasseh is not only an example of someone who did evil but of someone who led the whole nation astray into occult religion, sin, oppression, and violence. His influence was so widespread that it is said: “the people did not listen. Manasseh led them astray, so that they did more evil than the nations the LORD had destroyed before the Israelites” (v.9). The anti-faith world-view into which he strayed led him to build a world-system which rebelled against the principle of heaven and sank the nation into the helpless whirlpool of wickedness. God’s wisdom could no longer look sensible to them. The occult that they now subscribed to demanded the sacrifice of their own sons.

Adolph Hitler – The man who plunged the world into World War II. His charismatic weaving of the Nazi governmental fabric on the principles of Nazi philosophy was so apt that it left almost no loophole for an overthrow. He was a leader of a bad change, constructing a system in which the conscience of his men was deeply altered. There is one story of an SS officer who was standing by watching the Jews being brought into a concentration camp. One woman, with her four children walking hands in hand, looked at him and asked, “Look at these little beautiful faces. Can you really have the heart to kill them?” The SS officer answered nothing. Children were usually immediately gassed in Hitler’s concentration camps. They were useless. That evening, he returned back to his home and normally played with his own children without feeling a bit stricken over what had transpired during that day. Philip Zimbardo of Stanford University has called this the “Lucifer Effect”, a process in which the saintliest person can be turned into a devil, when his mind is guided along avenues of impersonalization, dehumanization, and deindividuation of others. One can’t regard ideologies slackly; not at all those systems that are being built over them.

One can give examples from Communism, Talibanism, Cults, Occults, and several socially evil systems. However, if there can be leaders of evil change; there have been and must also rise up a leadership of good change in the world. If a leader can lead a nation into hell, a leader and a synergy of many leaders can certainly lead this nation into a better world. Unless we are able to penetrate the ideology and culture with a transformative outlook and function, we cannot expect lasting changes.

Challenges

The two main challenges simply put are:

1. **To identify the ideological bases of a particular offense system.** It is not just enough to treat the symptoms. The root of the disease must be identified. If we are not willing to acknowledge the ideological problem, chances are that we are drifting with it. If we do not stand to expose it, we are no longer functioning as God’s children of light.
2. **To eliminate the problem on Kingdom principles.** The Kingdom principles are the ones that Christ practiced. It is not silver and gold but bold witnessing, the call to repentance and a ministry of healing and deliverance that can emancipate the society and individuals from the clutches of oppression. The purpose of the anointing is to bring deliverance (Lk. 4:18). Unless we are spiritually confronting the forces of evil, we are not really functioning as the ambassadors of Christ in this world. We can never transform the world unless we have learnt the significance of right communication and implementation of Kingdom principles in the place where we set our foot.

This might seem easy to say and difficult to do; but, to have said itself will have accomplished and brought to light a massive need of the church.

Solutions

Christ gives us the solutions:

1. **Confrontation and Elimination:** He said “If your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life maimed or crippled than to have two hands or two feet and be thrown into eternal fire.” (Matt.18:8). It is important to decide if we would allow the whole system go to hell, or initiate a transformative work that heals the whole body and brings lasting deliverance. Elements of culture that are destructive and false must be confronted with the light of the Gospel and loving practice of truth.
 2. **Saving the Little Ones:** Christ calls us to go out and save the little lost sheep. We are glad that there has been a great movement towards ministry among children in these days. We realize that if we can save the little ones at their tender age, when they are highly vulnerable, we have saved them for eternity. It is only a heartless shepherd who would leave his hundredth sheep to die just because he got ninety-nine more. Every little child of this world is precious in the eyes of God. They must be brought back into God’s fold, into the place and culture of true greatness. For, our “Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost” (Matt.18:14).
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